Heritage Lottery Fund supports appeal for Painted Hall conservation

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The money means that plans for a full HLF grant application of £364,000 for the scheme can now go ahead.

Created in the early 18th century by Sir James Thornhill for Sir Christopher Wren's Greenwich Hospital, the spectacular Painted Hall is one of the jewels in the crown of the Old Royal Naval College. Open to the public daily, free of charge, it has contributed to the Old Royal Naval College's popularity as a heritage visitor attraction (the ORNC was one of the country's top 20 most popular attractions in 2010) and is a highlight of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site.

"It is almost sixty years since the last conservation work was undertaken on this baroque masterpiece," says Sir Robert Crawford, Chair of the Trustees of the Greenwich Foundation. "When the Greenwich Foundation was established to manage the Old Royal Naval College, one of its key responsibilities was to conserve and preserve for the nation all the buildings on this internationally important heritage site. The paintings of the Painted Hall are among the largest and finest allegorical wall paintings in Britain, by Sir James Thornhill, an artist who merits wide appreciation. This project will secure the future of his greatest work for generations to come.

"We are delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has agreed to support us in the early stages of fundraising to undertake this major project."

Sue Bowers, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund London said: "We're extremely pleased to give initial support for this scheme to conserve the Painted Hall, and we look forward to receiving the application for a full grant in the future."

With its 2,600 sqm of allegorical wall paintings, the Painted Hall was Thornhill's most extensive commission, taking the artist almost 20 years to complete. In the dining hall proposed for the Royal Hospital for Seamen the artist was asked to create a homage to Britain's maritime power and royal family. The astonishing ceiling of the Lower Hall shows the contribution the British navy made to the prosperity of the nation at the time of William III and Mary II, under during whose reign the Hospital was commissioned, and the Upper Hall ceiling features the last of the Stuart monarchs, Queen Anne, during whose reign the Lower Hall paintings were made. The west wall however features Britain's new royal family – the Hanoverians. George I is shown surrounded by his children and grandchildren. The future George II stands beside a figure personifying Naval Victory, while both Prince Frederick, father of the future George III, and the Duke of Cumberland, later to become the 'scourge of the Jacobites' at the Battle of Culloden, are shown as young children. St Paul's Cathedral looms large in the background, as a mark of respect to Wren who had died as the painting was being completed. Thornhill himself appears in the bottom right hand corner (probably painted by one of the artist's assistants). After completion in 1727, the Greenwich pensioners moved their dining room to the undercrofts below, and the Hall became a popular visitor attraction with an admission price of 6d. In the early 19th century the Painted Hall became the home of the National Gallery of Naval Art – one of Britain's first public art galleries. It was not used again as a dining room until 1936, when the paintings were moved to the newly-established National Maritime Museum.

The first stage of the conservation work will focus on the west wall and is due to begin in 2012 after the London Olympics. It is expected to take around nine months to complete and to cost in the region of £460,000. Plaster and paint layers will be consolidated, cracks will be filled in and retouched, old water damage, paint flaking and varnish

blanching will be repaired, and the surfaces will be gently cleaned throughout. The project will also offer two apprentices the opportunity to work alongside experienced conservators as well as a number of volunteer positions. Free learning and community activities will take place throughout the project.

It is envisaged that the long-term conservation plan will be delivered in four phases and over a number of years with an estimated total cost of in excess of £2 million. Subsequent works will focus on the large ceiling painting and window reveals in the lower hall, the smaller ceiling painting and remaining walls in the upper hall, and the main entrance vestibule and cupola.

For further details about the Painted Hall conservation work and how to support the appeal visit the Old Royal Naval College website.

10 key facts about the Painted Hall

1. The Painted Hall is the largest continuous figurative scheme in the UK with over 2600 sqm of allegorical wall paintings.
2. It took James Thornhill over 19 years (from 1708 to 1727) to complete the paintings in Sir Christopher Wren's maritime masterpiece.
3. The commission was partly paid for by the booty of notorious pirate, Captain Kidd, which had been confiscated by the crown.
4. In the 18th century the Painted Hall became a celebrated visitor attraction instead of being used for its original purpose – a refectory for naval pensioners.
5. The body of Admiral Nelson lay in state in the Painted Hall in 1806 before his funeral up river at St Paul's Cathedral, and the Old Royal Naval College now hosts an annual Trafalgar Dinner in this historic setting.
6. For over a century, from 1824, the Painted Hall was the National Gallery of Naval Art, while for almost 60 years, from 1939, it served its original purpose as the dining hall of the Royal Naval College.
7. The public has had free access to the Painted Hall for up to 363 days a year since 2002, following the Greenwich Foundation taking over management of the Old Royal Naval College in 1999.
8. There were 1.3m visits to the attractions making up the Old Royal Naval College last year, making it the UK's 15th most popular visitor attraction in 2010.
9. From time to time the Painted Hall is used as a location for filming including the opening scenes of The Pirates of the Caribbean – On Stranger Tides starring Johnny Depp, Guy Ritchie's second Sherlock Holmes movie starring Robert Downey Jr and Jude Law, due for release in December 2011, and the soon to be released Iron Lady starring Meryl Streep.
10. The Painted Hall is becoming an increasingly popular wedding venue.

Notes to editors

*A first-round pass means the project meets HLF criteria for funding and HLF believes the project has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award. On occasion, an applicant with a first-round pass will also be awarded development funding towards the development of their scheme.

Old Royal Naval College
Sir Christopher Wren's twin-domed riverside masterpiece is one of London's most iconic buildings. It was built three

hundred years ago as the Royal Hospital for Seamen, a refuge for injured and impoverished sailors of the Royal Navy. In the 19th century it became the Royal Naval College, where the Navy's officers were trained. In 1998 the Royal Naval College moved to Shrivenham, and the Greenwich Foundation took over management of the site to conserve the buildings and open them to the public. By 2010 the site, which includes the Painted Hall, Chapel and Discover Greenwich visitor and interpretation centre, and stages a year-round programme of events, had become the 15th most popular visitor attraction in the UK.

Heritage Lottery Fund

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported over 30,000 projects, allocating £4.7billion across the UK.

A stunning dining hall painting commissioned for Wren's Greenwich Hospital

James Thornhill was invited to make a painted interior in the refectory of the Royal Hospital for Seamen while he was working on the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. Whereas for the former the artist was commissioned to paint a biblical subject (Eight Scenes from the Life of St Paul), for this later commission the subject was to be a celebration of Britain's maritime power. Begun under the Stuarts (Queen Anne) and completed under the Hanoverians (George I), the Painted Hall also marks a key moment in British royal history.

A masterpiece that was almost 20 years in the making

The allegorical theme of the huge and exuberant Lower Hall ceiling is the Triumph of Peace and Liberty over Tyranny, and pays due tribute to Stuart monarchs William and Mary and British maritime power. Within the oval frame are the four seasons and other references to the passing of time including the signs of the zodiac. Beyond the arch in the Upper Hall Queen Anne surveys the continents of the world, while on the west wall her Hanoverian successors, George I and his family, are shown in sober glory. Elsewhere much use is made of trompe l'oeil painting, on the columns, windowsills and in the vestibule. During the period when he working on the painting Thornhill became court Painter to the new King, George I, and was subsequently knighted.

Sir James Thornhill (1675 - 1734)

Born in Dorset in 1675, artist James Thornhill was to rise to become a court painter and sergeant painter to George I and George II, a master of the Painters' Company and a fellow of the Royal Society. He was the first English painter to be knighted for his work, in 1720, and sat as a Member of Parliament for 12 years from 1722 until his death in 1734.

The eight scenes in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral (1715–19) and the allegories in the Painted Hall, Royal Hospital for Seamen (1708–27), are his two most considerable commissions with the majority of his paintings largely executed on the ceilings and stairs of country houses and palaces such as Hampton Court, Blenheim, and Chatsworth.

Among Thornhill's few canvases are the altarpiece for St. Mary's Parish Church, Weymouth, and a group portrait of the members of the House of Commons in which he was assisted by William Hogarth (who eloped with Thornhill's daughter in 1729).

Thornhill also made a number of portraits (his sitters including Sir Isaac Newton and co-founder of the Spectator Magazine, Richard Steele), book illustrations, theatre scenery, and the rose window of the north transept of Westminster Abbey.

Thornhill’s works can be seen in collections across the globe including The Louvre, Paris; Metropolitan Museum, New York; and National Portrait Gallery, Tate, Royal Academy and Courtauld Institute, London.